

C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

12 March 1964

25X1

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 14-64



25X1

SUBJECT: VIETNAM: Communist Views on the Stakes and on
Escalation

NOTE TO THE BOARD

This memorandum was initiated by the Staff to call attention to two factors which affect the struggle in South Vietnam and which risk being overlooked in the intensive attention being given to the local situation in South Vietnam. It is suggested this this memorandum be distributed as a Memorandum for the Director or an ONE Memorandum.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To the Communists, and particularly to Peiping, South Vietnam is, among other things, a testing ground for Mao's ideas regarding the ripeness of Asia, Africa, and Latin America for violent revolution and the low level of risk involved in conducting local wars against the US "paper tiger." A Communist victory there would greatly strengthen Mao against Khrushchev in the Communist world and would encourage Peiping and many leftist groups in the underdeveloped world to promote violent revolution without much regard to possible US opposition. On the other hand, escalation of the local war in South Vietnam would pose great military problems for North Vietnam (DRV) and Communist China and would tend to support

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Khrushchev's case against Mao. The prospect of escalation has apparently caused great worry in Moscow and Peiping and both appear recently to be urging Hanoi to ease off and forgo its hopes for a quick victory. They say that although victory is inevitable, the struggle will be prolonged and arduous. This helps explain hesitancy of the Communists to exploit fully their present advantage in South Vietnam.

1. Analysis of recent Communist propaganda, particularly that emanating from Peiping, calls attention to implications of the South Vietnam struggle which go far beyond the context of Vietnam or even Southeast Asia. In a recent airgram*, AmConGen Hong Kong opined that "In recent months Peiping has given many signs of the high priority it assigns to a Viet Cong victory." It goes on to say:

"...Peiping has an almost compulsive need to bring about a recognizable and reasonably early victory for 'people's revolutionary struggle' in South Vietnam to offset Khrushchev's 'capitulationist' line and prove a whole set of Mao's axioms. If the Viet Cong can continue to prolong the war, harass and defy the Saigon government, and nullify United States military superiority, Peiping will certainly press even more strongly toward complete victory on its own terms and the unconditional withdrawal of the United States.

* A-694, 21 February 1964. This airgram antedates by 12 days the People's Daily editorial, cited below.

"On the other hand, the steady reduction of Viet Cong control and authority, the infusion of confidence in the government among peasants and intellectuals, the stabilization of the country under an independent non-Communist government, and international acceptance of South Vietnam's viability, would all constitute a profound setback not only to Communist Chinese objectives per se, but to the 'thought of Mao Tse-Tung' from which Peiping's entire approach to international affairs derives its inspiration."

2. In a People's Daily editorial of 4 March Peiping stressed more sharply than ever before the importance it places on the struggle in South Vietnam as a demonstration of the correctness of Mao's ideas (in implied contrast to those of Khrushchev) concerning the ripeness of Asia, Africa, and Latin America for "wars of liberation," the smallness of the risk involved in supporting such wars, and the "paper tiger" status of the US.*

3. It is clear from Chinese propaganda that if the Viet Cong were to succeed in driving the US from Vietnam, Peiping would use that fact to belabor Khrushchev in the intra-Communist dispute and would cite it as proof that the time was ripe to initiate or step up similar actions wherever possible

* Selected excerpts from this editorial follow at Annex.

in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It is likely that many important leftists in the underdeveloped countries of those continents would be persuaded that Peiping, had, indeed, shown the way to successful revolution and anti-imperialism. It would also be seen by some as puncturing the myth of the invincibility of the white race and showing, as Mao has said, that determined men can win without great weapons.

4. If, on the other hand, the fighting in Vietnam began to escalate -- at first with attacks on the DRV -- this would be widely interpreted in the Communist world as proof of Khrushchev's thesis that local wars are risky and can escalate indefinitely if pushed too fast and far. This would fortify the Soviet line that Peiping's reckless policies threaten to bring on a nuclear war.

5. During the past two weeks or so the Communist world has been displaying some disarray on the problem of escalation of the war in Vietnam. US press rumors of the possibility of carrying the war to North Vietnam have not so far elicited the defiant Chinese response that might have been expected. The 4 March People's Daily editorial and Foreign

Minister Chen Yi's 2 March message* to DRV Foreign Minister Xuan Thuy did not make any promise of Chinese support if the war were expanded to the DRV; instead these documents limited themselves to condemnation of the US, approval of the DRV's "just stand," and a declaration that the Chinese government and people are "deeply concerned about the grave situation" and "firmly oppose the US crime of stepping up the war of aggression."

6. The Chinese statements also make the point that the struggle in South Vietnam will be "extremely arduous and protracted" because the US is "far from throwing in the sponge." The Chinese have reacted quite coldly to what looked like a DRV effort to volunteer the Chinese for a fight with the US in a January Hoc Tap article which said anyone attacking the DRV would be face to face with the Chinese Communists and that the use of modern weapons might produce a counter-response from the rest of the Bloc. Peiping waited a month before reprinting the Hoc Tap article, and when it did so it omitted the portions outlining what would happen if the US carried the fight to North Vietnam. Significantly, a 6 March Radio Hanoi broadcast of the 4 March People's Daily editorial is also heavily

* NCNA, 3 March.

edited. It leaves out such key parts as the extended passages on Mao's thesis of the superiority of man over weapons, on "just" versus "unjust" wars, and on the importance of carrying on a resolute struggle for turning a US "iron tiger" into a "bean-curd tiger" (which, one supposes, is even softer than a paper tiger). It also omits the reference to a prolonged and arduous struggle and the editorial's weak response* to President Johnson's warning about the DRV's "deeply dangerous game."

7. The USSR has responded to the escalation rumors in a cautious manner. An authorized Tass statement of 25 February did not mention the possibility of US moves against the DRV as it declared that the Soviet "people" would provide "necessary assistance and support" to "the South Vietnamese struggle." Domestic broadcasts and publications appear to have followed this line of very generalized warnings and to avoid specifically mentioning the possibility of extension of the war to North Vietnam and subsequent Soviet intervention. Unofficial Soviet commentators have made stronger statements in broadcasts beamed outside the USSR. An example is the 2 March broadcast by commentator Godunov, beamed to North America,

* "Will they (US) come to any good if they try to poke their noses in elsewhere?"

which said that "the Pentagon brasshats are making a bad mistake if they imagine that they can attack North Vietnam with impunity. The Soviet Union has already warned them that it will not permit this and will repulse invasion." These external broadcasts would appear to be designed to worry the US rather than to commit the USSR to any course of action. In general, the USSR appears to be encouraging the DRV to put more stress on the political aspects of its struggle and, perhaps, to seek negotiations and a form of neutralization of the South as a next step.

8. If the fighting in Vietnam were to escalate substantially, Peiping would be worried on two accounts. In the first place, Peiping is almost certainly anxious not to get involved in war against a major power at a time when its own armed forces are so ill equipped and Soviet backing is so uncertain. Particularly horrible for them to contemplate would be an air war with the US. Peiping's belligerent enthusiasm for pushing the struggle in Vietnam has been based on the Maoist thesis that it is relatively safe to do so because the US is a paper tiger and will not risk escalation when pushed, at least not until that future day when it is isolated on its

home base and "lashes out like a cornered rat." Secondly, substantial escalation would tend to refute Mao's thesis and support Khrushchev's revisionism before the rest of the Communist world. Thus Peiping is strongly motivated to prevent escalation and has refrained from committing itself. It is possible that Ho Chi Minh was reflecting damping pressures from Peiping when in his interview with a Cuban journalist on 29 February* he avoided reference to any commitments by the socialist camp or the possibility of the war's being carried to the North and he stressed that the struggle would be protracted and difficult.

9. The DRV in its turn has profound reasons to fear escalation. In the first place it is in no position to take on a major opponent in direct warfare, and, as illustrated above, it probably does not feel very certain about the support forthcoming from its allies. Furthermore, the assurance of Chinese support would not bring unadulterated joy to Hanoi. The prospect of being a battleground for a ChiCom- USwar is not a cheerful one and there must be strong doubt about the efficacy of Chinese protection against US attacks, especially by air. And even then, Hanoi must worry that escalation of the conflict would surely

* Broadcast by Hanoi, 2 March.

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bring a greatly enlarged ChiCom presence in Vietnam and increasing Chinese control of DRV affairs -- a situation Hanoi is almost certainly anxious to avoid.

10. It would seem that Communist fears of escalation on both military and ideological grounds, and the intensity and probable direction of the Sino-Soviet dispute, may prove important to the course of the war in South Vietnam. Indeed, even mere press rumors of the possibility of escalation appear to have had considerable impact upon the Communists and increased their caution. If Hanoi and Peiping are convinced that the US is fully prepared to escalate, it is probable that they will put brakes on the Communist struggle in South Vietnam and Laos, (indeed they may already have done so) pushing only to the extent they feel they can get by with and waiting for the US to become sufficiently involved elsewhere in the world or to change to a less resolute policy because of elections or the gradual erosion of its will to pay the price of holding fast in Vietnam.

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ANNEX

Selected excerpts from the 4 March People's Daily Editorial
(underlining added)

"...US imperialism is suffering one heavy reverse after another in its aggression in South Vietnam. These reverses are extraordinarily serious because the United States has been using South Vietnam as the testing ground for its special warfare. If it fails in the test in South Vietnam, it can hardly hope for success in other places. What is more, the use of special warfare to suppress the national liberation movement is considered by the United States to be the backbone of its global strategy. If special warfare fails, its global strategy is as good as lost."

"The heavy blows dealt the US imperialism by the South Vietnamese people are victories of tremendous significance. They demonstrate that US imperialism is not formidable and that the people can defeat aggressors if they rise in resistance and persist in their struggle."

"...If, when the United States started its special warfare counting on its superior military strength, the South Vietnamese people had been deterred by the arrogance of the aggressors and had failed to wage a tit-for-tat struggle, then US imperialism would have truly become a living tiger capable of eating man. However, the South Vietnamese people, by their courageous struggle, have punctured the US paper tiger and exposed it for what it is.

"Whether a living and real tiger can be turned into a dead and paper tiger and an iron tiger into a bean curd tiger depends on the attitude adopted by the peoples of the world toward US imperialist aggression. This is an incontrovertible truth that is universally applicable. The people of any country or region, subjected to US aggression, can win victory if only they are not overawed by its apparent strength and dare and know how to struggle. So, in this sense, the victories won by the South Vietnamese people have universal significance."

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